

LET HEAVEN AND NATURE SING

Once again we have heard the story we came tonight to hear.

“And the time came that she should be delivered...Mary brought forth her first-born son...laid him in a manger...There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night...Lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them...and they were sore afraid...And the angel said, “Fear not, for behold I bring unto you this day a savior, who is Christ the Lord...” and you know the rest. How immediately the skies lit up with angels, countless angels, singing exultant “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace.”

In some ways we associate Christmas with silence. Something in the gift of the holy child moves us to a kind of hush. A stillness of wonder and love. So the Christmas song that seems to move us most is *Silent Night*.

Silent night or not, according to Luke out in the fields that night was a great, joyous racket, “Good news, great joy,” said the angel, who beams, and then wheels around to conduct thousands in the choir, all singing in their exquisite voices, “Glory, glory to God.”

And since it is music of great joy, why don't we just go ahead and imagine there's a band up there – great brass, woodwinds, strings, all kinds of percussion. Why not imagine some dancing too – angels spinning, whirling, leaping – somersaulting angels. Imagine the scene however you will, just make sure you see it jubilant.

And when the shepherds, all breathless, got to the stable, maybe there was silence, if the baby was asleep. But what did they see on Mary's face, along with her exhaustion, but the look of fathomless joy. The deepest joy will often come wrapped in warm silence.

The tag of the story is that the shepherds went back to the fields glorifying God. Still exuberant. Do they dance around the fire? Do they sing, as they'd witnessed the angels doing? Why not? “For unto us a child is born.” God with us – embodied in the world. Salvation. Transformation. Liberation in the world.

So we will end this service tonight, with a jubilant singing of “Joy to the World; the Lord is come! Let heaven and nature sing.”

You know, the odd thing about that carol is that it was not originally written for Christmas. If you were to look at the words, you would see nothing about angels or shepherds. Baby Jesus isn't even mentioned.

What it is is a paraphrase of an Old Testament psalm; a portion of psalm 98. The hymn writer was a 17th century English pastor named Isaac Watts. He wrote more than six hundred psalm paraphrases and hymns, one of which is *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*. He included the one we call *Joy to the World* in a collection he published in 1719, and it was sung to various tunes that the church already had, and it was sung at any time of year.

One hundred twenty years went by before it got its own tune. A church music educator named James Lowell Mason wrote it in 1839. He said it was from George Friedrich Handel, but not by much. In Handel's *Messiah*, the opening notes of "Glory to God" are the same notes as "Joy to the World." (I know you can't tell that by my rendition, but trust me. It is.) And when the carol has, "let heaven and nature sing, let heaven and nature sing," the notes are much the same as what Handel wrote for the strings just before "Comfort ye, my people." But it really is Mason's tune.

And still they sang it all year round. The connection to Christmas wasn't locked in until a choir recorded it and released it for play on the radio in December of 1911. And get this: *Joy to the World* reached number 57 on the pop charts in 1911.

I would call it spectacularly fitting how this non-Christmas Christmas carol refused containment to one season of the year, just as joy cannot be contained. Joy doesn't keep a schedule. Joy is a freedom in the soul that rises anytime, anyplace.

I'll never forget several years ago a worship service at Second Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, the church I served before coming to Little Rock. Right in the middle of a worship service there a woman passed out. Her name was Martha Denton. About twenty minutes into the service she just slumped over, unconscious. It turned out she was okay, but we didn't know it yet. Somebody called 911. We prayed for her. And then the service was just on hold. You don't get up and preach when the EMS people are on their way in, with their radios crackling, about to carry someone unconscious out of the room and you're not even sure if she's going to survive.

So what do you do, when you're waiting for all of that? We said, "Well, let's sing a hymn. Does anyone have a suggestion for the hymn we sing?" Quick as can be, a loud voice from toward the back of the sanctuary replied. It was Joe Gill. Joe was tall and lean. Marvelously friendly, and also could be stern. Had a bit of a rough edge. You could count on Joe. If the choir sang something really booming and big, or if on rare occasions the sermon happened to strike the right cord with Joe, he would shout out this loud, "Amen!" Scared me to death.

Anyway, there we are in the service, all of us concerned and waiting for the paramedics. "So why don't we sing a hymn. Does anyone have a suggestion?" And immediately Joe shot back in a loud voice the hymn we should sing, "Joy to the World!"

Well that didn't seem quite the right note to strike. But then it also didn't feel quite right to say "Well does anybody else have a suggestion?" And so we just did it. The organist struck up the organ, and while they were carrying out poor Martha Denton, we were all singing, "Joy to the World! The Lord is come." I thought the paramedics might drop her.

Everything ended well, but it was weird. Nonetheless, Joe's choice wasn't altogether wrong. Because the joy in our possession runs so much deeper than the evident circumstances.

So the apostle Paul, who was likely facing execution, could write from prison of his joy, and urge his friends, "Rejoice in the Lord with me; again I say rejoice always, the Lord is near."

I've seen this in the faces of the dying. Even people whose hearts are shattered may find in their tears no contradiction of their essential joy.

Would you call that unnatural? Or would you call it the most natural thing in the world if God is now, here, and forever for us and with us.

Oh, and it is bigger than that. Immensely bigger. When Christ comes to the world, it is not just for us humans. It is for all creation. God made nature beautiful, and we have done nature harm. The news of Christ's coming to earth is news that God means to heal all nature too.

You know the words from the carol, "Let heaven and nature sing. Let earth receive her king. Fields and flood. Rocks, hills and plains, repeat the sounding joy."

It's not angels singing here; it's the rocks. It's the oceans exultant. The book of Genesis knows that our species brings a curse upon nature. The first couple commissioned by God to care for the earth takes from a tree what they shouldn't, resulting, says the story, among other things, in the springing up of thorns. Which is to say, our sins have painful implications for the earth.

So the carol sings, "No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the growth. He comes to make his blessing flow, far as the curse is found."

Do you really think that we humans are all that he came to earth to love and to save? Do you think we can love and serve Christ and not love nature, and serve the good of the earth, which is called to sing with us the great joy?

Which I guess is why nature is so much a part of our Christmas story. A field. A flock. A woman giving birth. A manger for feeding animals. And in our Nativity scenes we place animals all around – sheep, cow, donkey, camel. I heard of a child who added a dinosaur to the scene, and I say, "Good for him."

My favorite drawing of a manger scene came out of a first grade Sunday school class. Mary is holding her baby high. In attendance and looking on is a duck, and also a rooster, slightly bowing. And a pig. What on earth is a pig doing in a Jewish stable?

I decided the duck means that the ridiculous are welcome. The rooster means that the proud are welcome, if humbled. The pig means there's a place for the unclean as well.

This holy child is truly for us all, and for all of blessed creation.

In that first-grade drawing, on the roof of the stable stands an enormous angel; his smile as broad as his face. Four great stars are all around him, and his arms are spread across the whole sky.

That is the news of the great welcoming joy, outlasting all seasons, outshining all circumstances, encompassing beautifully more than the human community. The love of God is new-born in the world for us all.

Let heaven and nature sing. Let every heart prepare him room. Merry Christmas. Amen.